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California Postsecondary Education Commission

Summary of the Commission's Program Review Principles and Guidelines

Although each public higher education system in California has a unique mission and social purpose, the systems are united in a most common and fundamental way: each aims to enhance the intellectual, technical, and creative capacity of its student learners. Because advanced knowledge -- scientific, technical, and procedural -- tends to be organized by fields of study, and delivered to students through specific programs, the ultimate success and benefit of the state's higher education enterprise rests with the quality and breadth of institutional degree and certificate programs.

Legislative Mandate

Assembly Resolution 770, Statutes of 1974, established the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) as the statewide planning and coordinating agency for higher education, with specific mandated planning functions and responsibilities. Primary among the responsibilities given to CPEC is academic and vocational program review. In addition, the Commission is charged with reviewing and commenting on the need for new campuses and off-campus centers.

The Commission's program review responsibilities include the following:

- Review and comment on the long-range plans developed by the public higher education governing boards and make recommendations to the Legislature and Governor.
- Review and comment on the need for new academic, vocational, and certificate programs proposed by the public higher education systems and make recommendations to the Legislature and Governor.
- Evaluate and comment on the program review process of the public higher education systems.
- Identify societal educational needs and encourage institutional adaptability to change.
- Review periodically the availability of continuing education programs for adults and make appropriate recommendations.

The Commission developed a set of principles to guide the program review process. The principles are intended to: (a) safeguard the state against inefficiencies in the allocation of program resources; (b) help ensure that new programs will meet student and societal needs; and (c) ensure that programs are well conceived and that they will have desired educational and social consequences. As defined in statute, the Commission's role in the review process is primarily advisory. However, in the case of Joint Doctoral Programs involving public and private institutions, the Commission has approval authority.

Recent enhancements to the Commission's review process include greater emphasis placed on the long-range plans of the systems so that staff can consider prospective programs five years in advance of implementation. This has enabled the Commission to alert the systems of potential planning concerns early in the review process before formal proposals are submitted.

Definitions

Academic and Vocational Programs: A series of courses arranged in a sequence leading to a degree or certificate.

Program Plan: A program plan contains, at a minimum, an inventory of the programs offered or projected to be offered by the campuses comprising a higher education system. Also included are proposed timetables for implementation and narrative descriptions of problem areas, program trends, and future needs. In general, plans are prepared for a five-year period and revised and updated annually.

Program Proposal: A document prepared by a campus that describes and justifies the need for a new degree or certificate program. The proposal must address each of the Commission's program review elements.

Program Review Council: An advisory body established to assist Commission staff in matters related to program review and academic planning. The Council consists of representatives from the three public higher education systems, the State Department of Education, and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities.

Commission's Program Review Principles and Guidelines

1. Student Demand

Within reasonable limits, students should have the opportunity to enroll in programs of study in which they are interested and for which they are qualified. Therefore, student demand for programs, indicated primarily by current and projected enrollments, is an important consideration in determining the need for a program.

2. Societal Needs

Postsecondary education institutions bear a responsibility for preparing students to meet the State's workforce and knowledge needs. Work force demand projections serve as one indication of the need for a proposed program. Although achieving and maintaining a perfect balance between supply and demand in any given career field is nearly impossible, it is important nevertheless that the number of persons trained in a field and the number of job openings in that field remain in reasonable balance.

3. Appropriateness to Institutional and Segmental Mission

Programs offered by public institution within a given system must comply with the delineation of function for that system, as set forth in the California Master Plan for Higher Education. Proposed new programs must also be consistent with the institution's own statement of mission and must be approved by the system's statewide governing body.

4. The Number of Existing and Proposed Programs in the Field

An inventory of existing and proposed programs, compiled by the Commission staff from the plans of all systems of postsecondary education, provides the initial indication of apparent duplication or undue proliferation of programs, both within and among the systems. However, the number of programs alone cannot be regarded as an indication of unnecessary duplication. This is because (a) programs with similar titles may have varying course objectives or content, (b) there may be a demonstrated need for the program in a particular region of the state, or (c) the program may be needed for an institution to achieve academic comparability within a given system.

5. Total Costs of the Program

The relative costs of a program, when compared with other programs in the same or different program areas, constitute another criterion in the program review process. Included in the consideration of costs are the number of new faculty required and the student/faculty ratios, as well as costs associated with equipment, library resources, and facilities necessary to deliver the program. For a new program, it is necessary to know the source of the funds required for its support, both initially and in the long run.

6. The Maintenance and Improvement of Quality

Protecting the public interest and trust requires that educational programs at all levels be high quality. Although the primary responsibility for the quality of programs rests with the institution and its system, the Commission, for its part, considers pertinent information to verify that high standards have been established for the operation and evaluation of the program.

7. The Advancement of Knowledge

The program review process encourages the growth and development of intellectual and creative scholarship. When the advancement of knowledge seems to require the continuation of existing programs or the establishment of programs in new disciplines or in new combinations of existing disciplines, such considerations as costs, student demand, or employment opportunities may become secondary.